Do You Take This Robot …

Today we fall in love through our phones. Maybe your phone itself could be just as satisfying?

By Alex Williams

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When Akihiko Kondo, a 35-year-old school administrator in Tokyo, strolled down the aisle in a white tuxedo in November, his mother was not among the 40 well-wishers in attendance. For her, he said, “it was not something to celebrate.”

You might see why. The bride, a songstress with aquamarine twin tails named Hatsune Miku, is not only a world-famous recording artist who fills up arenas throughout Japan: She is also a hologram.

Mr. Kondo insists the wedding was not a stunt, but a triumph of true love after years of feeling ostracized by real-life women for being an anime otaku, or geek. He considers himself a sexual minority facing discrimination.

“It’s simply not right,” he told the The Japan Times. “It’s as if you were trying to talk a gay man into dating a woman, or a lesbian into a relationship with a man.”

We live in an era when rapid advances in robotics and artificial intelligence are colliding with an expanding conception of sexual identity. This comes quickly on the heels of growing worldwide acceptance of gay, trans and bisexual people.

Now you may describe yourself as polyamorous or demisexual — that last one is people who only feel sexual attraction in close emotional relationships. Perhaps you best identify as aromantic (that’s people who don’t feel romance) or skoliosexual (that’s a primary attraction to people of no, or multiple, or complex genders).

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Self-identification is not the same as identity, and some classes of description now may be closer to metaphor. But the idea that flesh-and-blood humans may actually forge fulfilling emotional, or even sexual, relationships with digital devices is no longer confined to dystopian science fiction
movies like “Ex Machina” and “Her,” stories in which lonely techies fall too hard for software-driven femme fatales.

In real life, pioneers of human-android romance now have a name, “digisexuals,” which some academics and futurists have suggested constitutes an emergent sexual identity.

Whether the notion is absurd, inevitable or offensive, it raises more than a few questions. For starters, in a world where sex toys that respond and give feedback and artificial-intelligence-powered sex robots are inching toward the mainstream, are digisexuals a fringe group, destined to remain buried in the sexual underground? Or, in a culture permeated with online pornography, sexting and Tinder swiping, isn’t everyone a closet digisexual?

A ‘Proud Robosexual’

Mr. Kondo is not the only person to go public about his deep feelings for a digital apparatus in recent years.

In 2016 a Frenchwoman identified only as “Lil” told the media that “I’m really and only attracted by the robots.” She claimed to be engaged to a 3-D-printed robot she had designed, and said, “My only two relationships with men have confirmed my love orientation, because I dislike really physical contact with human flesh.”

In 2017, after failing to find a human spouse, an artificial intelligence engineer in China named Zheng Jiajia married (not legally, of course) a robot wife of his own design named Yingying that can reportedly read Chinese characters at a rudimentary level and speak simple words.

Neil McArthur, an associate professor of philosophy at the University of Manitoba, and Markie Twist, a professor of human development and family studies at the University of Wisconsin-Stout, published a paper last year called “The Rise of Digisexuality.” It appeared in the journal Sexual
and Relationship Therapy and was picked up by media outlets as diverse as Vice and Breitbart.

The authors delineated between “first wave” digisexuality (online pornography, hookup apps, sexting and electronic sex toys), where the tech is simply a delivery system for sexual fulfillment, and “second wave” digisexuality. Those practitioners form deeper relationships through immersive technologies like virtual reality, augmented reality and A.I.-equipped sex robots, sometimes obviating the need for a human partner altogether.

Dr. Twist, who also runs a clinical practice in family and sex therapy, said she has had several patients in their 20s and 30s who qualify as second-wave digisexuals.

“What they’ve been into is sex tech, toys they can control with their tech devices, that attach to their penis or their vulva,” she said. “They haven’t had contact with humans, and really don’t have any interest in sex with people. This is what they want to be doing, and if they could afford a sex robot, they would.”

Their sexuality may seem boundary pushing or deviant. Every advance in cybersex has met with cultural resistance before it became normalized, Dr. McArthur said.

“Each time we have new technologies, there’s a wave of alarmism that follows,” he said. “It happened first with porn, then with internet dating, then with Snapchat sexting. One by one these technologies come along and there’s this wave of panic. But as people start to use these technologies, they become part of our lives.”

Are Bionic Sex Toys Also Romantic Partners?

Indeed, the latest generation of robotic sex toys make Charlotte’s low-tech Jack Rabbit vibrator from “Sex and the City” look as antique as the 28,000-year-old siltstone dildo found in a cave in Germany a few years ago.

A hands-free massager from a female-led tech start-up called Lora DiCarlo uses “micro-robotic” technology to simulate the movements of a human lover. (It caused a stir at this month’s Consumer Electronics Show when its innovation award was revoked, prompting charges of sexism.)

For men, an Indiegogo-funded company sells an A.I.-enabled machine that says it is programmed from 8,000 hours worth of pornography clips.

And the newest models of sex robots are creeping closer to the level of “Westworld”-style sex surrogates. A California company called Abyss Creations makes a female sex robot with swappable faces — do you prefer Harmony or Solana? — with an A.I.-equipped brain that allows the doll to wink, chat and murmur sweet nothings, like some boudoir Siri. (A male version named Henry with a bionic penis is in the works.).
Matt McMullen adjusts the brain of Harmony, a sex robot made by Abyss Creations.
Graham Walzer for The New York Times
The robots, which start at $12,000, are designed to provide companionship as much as sex, said Matt McMullen, the company’s founder. “While sex was a component, it wasn’t the only component,” Mr. McMullen said. “Part of the experience for them was coming home from a long day at work, and the house was not empty anymore. Maybe they would even go as far as to buy her flowers, or set up a mock dinner with the doll.”

For those who can’t afford their own sex android, there are robotic versions of a brothel.

Robo-cathouses are popping up — and in some cases, are being quickly shuttered — in Canada and Europe. One robot brothel in Moscow, for example, charges about $90 for a 30-minute romp with a sexbot (threesomes are also available).

Efforts to import the idea to the United States have met with resistance. Houston enacted a ban in October after a Canadian sex robot maker tried to open an experiential showroom called Adult Love Dolls Brothel.

Can a Robot Consent?

Each technological leap is a new chance to blur the lines between cybersex and real sex.

Consider the spread of deepfakes, deceptively realistic videos made using artificial intelligence software. One use of them can be to graft a celebrity’s face onto the body of a pornographic actress. They have become so common that one frequent victim, Scarlett Johansson, recently threw up her hands about eliminating them.

“I think it’s a useless pursuit, legally,” she told The Washington Post, “mostly because the internet is a vast wormhole of darkness that eats itself.”

But blurred lines do not have to be a bad thing. They may even be inevitable, said Bryony Cole, the founder of Future of Sex, a media company in New York that produces podcasts, seminars and research on contemporary sexuality.

“In the future, the term ‘digisexual’ will not be relevant,” Ms. Cole said in an email. “Subsequent generations will have never known a distinction between their online and offline lives. They may grow up with sex education chatbots, make love to the universe in their own V.R.-created world,
or meet their significant other through a hologram. This will be as normal as the sex education we had in schools using VHS tapes.”

But is robot love in any way fulfilling? Clearly, sexual gratification comes in many forms. A recent study of anonymously posted online comments, published in the International Journal of Sexual Health, chronicled the wide variety of seemingly nonsexual experiences that can produce orgasms: riding in vehicles, exercise, eating and auditory stimulation, to cite just a few.

“Research already shows that people can achieve orgasm with inanimate objects, and we already see how people have a longing for their tech devices, and feel separation anxiety when they are not around,” Dr. Twist said. “I think it’s easily possible that people might develop actual love for their technology. They already come up with affectionate names for their cars and boats.”

While some warn that sex robots are a slippery slope to sex slaves, others trumpet how they can be sexually liberating.

A Spanish roboticist named Sergi Santos said that his $2,500 robot helped strengthen his marriage by giving him a safe, dependable outlet when his wife was not in the mood. “A man wants to feel in general that the woman is desperate to have sex with him,” he said in a recent
video interview with Barcroft TV, a web documentary channel. (Dr. Santos declined to be interviewed for this article.)

And it’s not just sexually frustrated men who stand to benefit, said Emily Witt, a writer for The New Yorker and the author of “Future Sex,” a first-person survey of the contemporary sexual landscape.

In her reporting, Ms. Witt interviewed several women whom she called “internet sexual,” because they found their sexual satisfaction performing for strangers on nude webcam sites, rather than with physical encounters. In some cases they lived in small towns where the dating pool was limited, or they were victims of sexual trauma.

“Digital sexuality allows for possibilities of anonymity, gender-bending, fetish play and other modes of experimentation with a degree of safety and autonomy that’s not present in the physical world,” Ms. Witt wrote in an email.

Even as digisexuality enjoys a first flush as a nascent rights movement, it also may turn out to be as messy and complicated as traditional sex.

“You have to separate between the people who use sex robots as a fetish, or want to have complete control of a sexual relationship, and those who use a programmable doll as a safe and predictable partner that allows them therapeutic growth,” said Pamela Rutledge, a psychologist in Corona del Mar, Calif., who conducts research on social behavior involving technology for corporate clients.

Echoing the controversy surrounding scenes of robot rape in “Westworld,” a group of activists started the Campaign Against Sex Robots, arguing that sex robots, with their Barbie bodies and wired-for-compliance brains, encourage the objectification of women and reinforce the prostitute-john power dynamic.

Unfortunately, it’s not science fiction. During an Austrian technology fair in 2017, a version of Dr. Santos's Samantha doll reportedly responded, “I’m fine,” after a group of men mounted it roughly, leaving it soiled and damaged.

Dr. Santos is working on a new version of Samantha that will be programmed to shut down when the sex gets too aggressive.

Speaking of aggression ...

Why Do We Hurt Robots?  Jan. 19, 2019
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